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RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 3246
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UNCLAS TEL AVIV 002556

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

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NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR XOX
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA
CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO ICD
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PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

Today's newspapers are mainly devoted to reactions to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's announcement of the cabinet decision on a construction freeze in the West Bank settlements.

The lead item in all print media relates to statements made by

Culture and Sport Minister Limor Livnat, who at a meeting of Likud activists called the American administration "awful" for the pressure it exerted on Israel which led to the construction freeze decision. Ma'ariv quoted Livnat as saying: "If in another week a tractor will drive up and start building housing units that have already been approved, we will be attacked again and nothing will remain from that decision that was meant to appease the world." The Prime Minister's Office was quick to dissociate itself from Livnat and said that her statements did not represent the prime minister's position

The Likud's right wing faction will begin a campaign to combat the freeze with a meeting this Saturday night and is trying to persuade members of Knesset and ministers who oppose the freeze to attend. The faction's leaders will also try to convene the Likud Central Committee in an effort to put pressure on the ministers. The Settlers Council and the chairmen of the local authorities in the West Bank also held an emergency meeting last night and decided on a series of steps "to continue the development and strengthening the base for settlement in Judea and Samaria, including the continuation of the construction in the Judea and Samaria settlements." Yediot Ahronot reports on plans to build thousands of new rooms in the settlements by closing balconies, to establish a school for Jewish construction workers, and to deluge the Supreme Court with appeals against illegal Palestinian construction.

Ma'ariv' provides a look at the presumed new attorney general, Yehuda Weinstein, who is Justice Minister Yaakov Neeman's preferred candidate. He describes him as a "work machine, but he loves to live well. The fact that he is one of Israel's successful lawyers does not contradict the fact that he is not the owner of any major firm. He does not believe in this. Weinstein chooses his clients well. Takes on a case, studies it from A to Z, dedicates as much time as necessary, and perhaps even more. A man of quality, not quantity."

Block Quotes:

Mideast:

II. "Netanyahu versus the Settlers Council"

Senior columnist Nahum Barnea wrote in the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (11/27): "The small hall in the Prime Minister's Office was not festive. Netanyahu showed up to improve on his Bar Ilan University speech. His words were directed at Barack Obama. Had Netanyahu been able to speak freely, he would have said: these are not my improvements. You screwed up. You raised everyone on a high horse of a settlement freeze and only later did you discover that you forgot to bring ladders. You screwed up, and I'm being generous. I'm willing to pay the price only to a certain point... His speech was aimed at telling the Americans: this is the effort Israel is willing to make in order to thwart the resignation [of Mahmoud Abbas]. If he does resign, don't blame us. He can also expect to face a clash with the settlements... [They are] in the minority, but they are more consolidated, more focused, and thus have a better chance of succeeding... Begin provided Netanyahu with an ideological kashrut certificate. Yaalon provided him with a security one... Their vote essentially neutralizes all opposition within the Likud... But Netanyahu is under suspicion. He needs to freeze to get the negotiations which will let him build. And his freeze will be closely monitored... The IDF will be tasked with enforcing the construction freeze. The government... will now have to destroy buildings in long standing communities. It will not be easy. This will be Netanyahu's first real audition before the Obama administration: the tougher it is, the more they will respect his determination... He believed he had passed the ball into Abu Mazen's court. However Abu Mazen is the master of movement without a ball: Netanyahu is the second prime minister who has thrown a ball into Abu Mazen's court only to discover that by some magical force, the ball has remained with him."

II. "Is Netanyahu positioning himself to be the next Ariel Sharon?" Yossi Verter, senior political correspondent, wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (11/27): "These days are especially tough for Benjamin Netanyahu... 'Mr. Anti-terror' is about to go down in history for paying the highest price ever to a

terrorist group in order to free one soldier... Netanyahu feels besieged... by his own past, beliefs, and declarations. His adoption of the "two state" principle, freezing construction in the settlements, and the Shalit deal are cases in point. Some even speculate that Netanyahu, like Sharon, is planning a far-reaching political move that will enable him... to break Likud up... and establish the new Likud with his partner Ehud Barak. The latter... would be glad to leave his ailing party... [The] prime minister promised the Likud faction to get the Shalit deal approved by both the cabinet and Knesset. The next day... he announced that he would bring the deal 'to the cabinet and to a public debate.' This was a small, imperceptible retreat. If the Knesset approves the deal with a small majority, he would rather drop it. Netanyahu wants an impressive majority... Such a majority would alleviate his agonizing. Thus, covertly, the prime minister's men began asking the various Knesset factions about their stance regarding the deal, should there be a Knesset debate."

III. "A tiny diplomatic crack"

The independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (11/27): "The prime minister's announcement this week to halt construction in the West Bank settlements will not satisfy those who consider the existence of settlements an obstacle for peace. Limiting the hiatus to a 10-month period... raise serious doubts about the prime minister's true intentions. It may be possible to be satisfied with the change in Benjamin Netanyahu's stance... but this is not a political test. This is an essential step in view of tremendous international pressure, the enormous blow to Israel's standing, and the threat to crush the diplomatic process. At the same time, the decision is not meant to bring about a peace agreement... The prime minister's decision... should have been made long ago. This latest freeze may be perceived as insufficient... The prime minister's decision cannot remain just a declaration... A freeze in construction is not meant to satisfy the United States as having achieved a diplomatic victory, or to be seen as a personal achievement by its president. Netanyahu opened a tiny diplomatic crack, but it is too little too late. This is only the first link in a process that Barack Obama has promised to bring to fruition. Now Washington must resume action along the main track, focusing on the immediate resumption of negotiations and determined mediation until an agreement is reached."

IV. "Price Tag of the Sacrifice"

Military correspondent Alex Fishman wrote in the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (11/27): "It will not end with the 450 prisoners that Hamas is demanding and not with an additional 550 prisoners, a good will gesture for President Mubarak... In order to preserve the partners on the Palestinian side, Israel will be forced to carry out another step of a wholesale prisoner release, which contradicts any security, diplomatic, or legal rationale. The PA is gravely concerned over the Shalit deal. The power that Hamas will gain will become an existential threat to the Palestinian Authority... All eyes in Israel are on December 15. On this date Abu Mazen is supposed to convene the PLO Central Committee and announce if he adopts their recommendation to postpone the elections. On this date Abu Mazen will clarify his personal intentions. He could resign immediately from his position as chairman of the PA or wait with his resignation until the elections are held. From here on out the PA might start to deteriorate quickly. His abrupt departure will create a dangerous vacuum and will place great question marks over the entire peace process. Barak led the decision on the freeze of new construction in the settlements for the next ten months. This is definitely a sort of oxygen mask for Abu Mazen. More resuscitation steps can take the form of more freedom of movement in the territories, in economic issues, or even in the form of an Israeli initiative to expand the areas under Palestinian Authority control... steps that ignite the Israeli Right.... Security sources in Israel are predicting that there will be no third Intifada... Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is now in the momentum of building the government institutions in preparation for the Palestinian state, which will be established within two years. The economy is growing, various cultural initiatives are emerging in the cities, and international organizations are involved in all levels of life in the West Bank: from the construction of offices of the Interior Ministry and the courts system through the establishment of a Palestinian army under the supervision of General Dayton."

IV. "It's not enough"

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (11/27): "With the patience of a taxi driver at a red light about to turn green, the Palestinian leadership responded to Wednesday's announcement of an Israeli moratorium on new settlement building with: 'It's not enough!'... The dispute between Palestinians and Israelis is not about settlements. It hinges on whether the Arabs are willing to recognize the legitimacy of Israel as the state of the Jewish people within any boundaries... Generation after generation, decade after decade, Israeli concession after concession, the Palestinians have never missed an opportunity to say, 'It's not enough.'... Special Envoy George Mitchell reacted with sparing approval to Netanyahu's moratorium... Secretary of State Clinton... acknowledged that "agreed swaps" should be part of negotiations based on the 1967 lines. To take additional risks for peace, Israelis must feel secure that the Obama administration wholly backs the 1967-plus formula. Washington needs to cajole Mahmoud Abbas back to the table to bargain in good faith and it should extract diplomatic gestures from its Arab allies in reciprocity for the premier's concessions. Otherwise, the discouraging message that comes across to Israelis who want an agreement is that no matter what we do, it will always 'fall short' with this administration and never be 'enough' for the Arabs.'"

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